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Mideast War: A Matter of Arab Pride...

A study of the intelligence reports from the Mideast strongly suggests that Egypt and Syria may have been driven by fierce pride into a war they fully expected to lose.

The Syrian Army chief, Gen. Mustapha Talas, was quoted by the Central Intelligence Agency, for example, as declaring desperately: "Despite the fact that . . . all the Arabs combined are weaker than Israel, there is no other choice. We must fight, and we will fight."

For months, he has been contending that the Mideast must be kept inflamed to attract world attention and to compel a solution. Only by keeping "the war case hot between us and Israel," he argued, could a political settlement be forced.

Continued the CIA cable: "Talas said he thought that if the Arabs had continued to 'fight' Israel after their successive defeats in 1948, 1956 and 1967, rather than turning their backs in defeat, many world leaders would have changed their policies vis-a-vis the Arab-Israeli dispute."

This logic reportedly was accepted by Syria's President Hafiz al-Asad but was resisted by Egypt's more cautious President Anwar Sadat. For three years, Sadat made belligerent noises but held back from open hostilities. He made saber-rattling speeches. He posed in uniform inspecting the Suez fortifications. He called upon Egyptians to prepare for the "inevitable battle."

But he issued secret orders to his generals, according to the intelligence reports, not to provoke Israel. A CIA cable quoted military sources as saying "that President Anwar Sadat, when threatening Israel with an all-out war, was bluffing and that he had informed the Army of this."

Sadat explained to his generals, asserted the cable, that he "had to make this stand in order to maintain international interest in the problem and to silence local unrest."

But the empty threats eventually bubble-gummed in Sadat's face. Other Arab leaders began to mock him. An intelligence report from Syria, for ex-

ample, quoted President al-Asad as declaring derisively that "he did not expect too much from Egyptians even if they initiated the fighting."

Even at home, Egyptians began to snicker at Sadat. A joke made the rounds in Cairo that he had ordered an attack on Israel but had come up with an excuse for every day of the week for holding back. The punch line: Saturday's excuse was that it would be improper to attack Israel on the Jewish sabbath.

The ridicule of Sadat, some observers feared, might goad him into taking rash action. This was the subject of a secret message from the U.S. embassy in Tel Aviv a few months ago.

"We believe," reported the embassy, "that Israeli leadership considers Egypt to be capable now with virtually no further preparation, and with practically no warning to launch renewed war of attrition along Suez canal or limited attack across it . . ."

("There is a tendency among Arabs, which Israelis have noted, to treat Sadat's threats toward Israel with derision. Israelis feel that it is this credi-

bility gap of Sadat's within the Arab world which conceivably could lead him, even against his better judgment, to decide impulsively to resume shooting."

The "snowballing of the situation," suggested a report, finally forced Sadat to fight. The war preparations, according to intelligence, began last spring. His Syrian ally, President al-Asad, reportedly was eager to plunge into the war. "When the blow comes... he vowed, according to the CIA, "we will seize the opportunity and fight."

But Sadat, cautious to the last, carefully coupled a diplomatic offensive with his military attack. He lined up Saudi Arabia's King Faisal to neutralize the U.S. by threatening to cut off oil shipments if Washington favored Israel.

Sadat also sent word to both Washington and Moscow that the fighting was intended to wake up the world over the Mideast crisis. Apparently, he sought to compel the great powers to impose a settlement on Israel that would force the Israelis to pull back from territory they captured in 1967.

The Israelis, who easily detected the military moves on both borders, bombarded Washington with warnings that the Syrians and Egyptians were pre-

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paring for a full-scale offensive. The warnings intensified in late September as the signs became clearer. But the policymakers in Washington, finding it difficult to believe the Arabs would risk military suicide, dismissed the Israeli messages as wolf cries.

The outbreak of fighting, apparently, has caused Moscow as much dismay as Washington. The Egyptians have made no overtures to Russia, so far as we can learn, to support the war effort or replace Egyptian losses. Instead, Sadat reportedly has turned to Saudi Arabia to finance the rebuilding of Egyptian military forces.

Syria's relations with Russia have also deteriorated. The Syrians were annoyed because the Soviet technicians

wouldn't man air defense missiles against Israeli planes. This forced the Syrians to go all the way to Hanoi to seek qualified people who knew how to operate the sophisticated Soviet equipment.

The Syrians were also stung by Israeli superiority in the skies. The proud Syrians preferred to blame this on inferior Soviet equipment rather than their own pilots.

Shortly before the fighting resumed, according to intelligence reports, Syria's Foreign Minister Abdel Khadam got into a nasty argument with Russia's Ambassador Nouredine Mohiedinov. The angry foreign minister responded by slapping strict travel restrictions on all Soviet personnel inside Syria. The Syrians tipped off the Russians about the coming attack, however, in time for them to withdraw dependents before the hostilities began.

Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, meanwhile, is trying to persuade the Arabs that the big powers cannot impose a settlement upon the Mideast. Only painful negotiations between the Arabs and Israelis, he has told them, can possibly bring a lasting peace.